



Wilton Park



Image: Alexey Zarubin

Report

Rethinking deterrence and assurance: Russia's strategy relating to regional coercion and war, and NATO's response

Wednesday 11 – Saturday 14 May 2016 | WP1470

In association with:





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The meeting convened to:

1. Assess the political and military dimensions of Russia's strategy for regional coercion and possible war against a NATO member;
2. Identify potential escalation dynamics in a Russia-NATO confrontation, especially if Russia should try to escalate its way out of failed conventional aggression with nuclear de-escalation strikes and other means;
3. Understand the challenges and requirements of effectively countering Russia's strategy;
4. Identify and explore key decisions that NATO will have to take at the July Warsaw summit bearing on the future evolution of NATO's deterrence and defence posture, including its nuclear component.

Key points

"...the need for clearer and more comprehensive assurance and deterrence policies is clear"

- Increasingly provocative behaviour from Russia, particularly its intervention in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine, and its apparent lack of interest in arms control agreements and other cooperative measures, represents a reversal of progress made since the signing of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, and points to a renewed threat to NATO. As a result of this, NATO's deterrence and defence posture is facing a prominent challenge. States along the Eastern border of the Alliance see a more immediate threat from Russia, while NATO members generally concur that the medium-term future of the NATO-Russia relations is also more likely to be characterized as competitive rather than cooperative. While a competitive relationship is not automatically an adversarial one, the need for clearer and more comprehensive assurance and deterrence policies is clear.
- Assessing Moscow's strategic and tactical calculus remains difficult, in part from a lack of public statements by Russian authorities, and obtaining a detailed understanding of nuclear doctrine is particularly difficult. Although Russia's political objectives are frequently characterised as unclear, expert opinion coalesces around the notion that the aim is to fracture the unity of the NATO Alliance. NATO must ensure it is demonstrating a continued political resolve and unity of the Alliance as a primary aspect of its defence and deterrence policies.
- Currently, NATO lacks an overarching strategy that integrates both nuclear and conventional deterrence. This lag with the current strategic environment could become more apparent with the integration and advancement of new tools and capabilities such as cyber, missile defence, and space based systems.

“Concerns have grown that the assumptions built into the Strategic Concept and DDPR are becoming progressively less applicable”

- NATO should ensure that it is not mirroring the characteristics of contemporary Russia nuclear posturing, which are largely considered a result of its position of weakness.
- The applicability of the 2012 DDPR in the current international security context is worthy of review. However, many observers believe that the DDPR does not need to be revisited at present, or at least recognise that the drawbacks of doing so warrant a delay in revisiting the document.
- In the longer term NATO needs to pursue a set of options to ease current tensions with Russia. Although options for such engagement are currently limited by Russian lack of interest, the Alliance needs to be able to identify appropriate avenues for de-escalation and dialogue.

NATO and Russia: From Wales to Warsaw

1. Maintaining political cohesion in the Alliance is central to responding to Russia’s challenge, as without this ‘soft’ underpinning, any ‘hard’ military aspects of the Alliance deterrence are weakened. More can be done to strengthen the perceived political resolve of the NATO posture, including statements and assurances to allies demonstrating an indivisible security for all, but the Alliance needs to ensure that all 28 nations are included, and the common voice of the Alliance is the one that is used.
2. Since the 2014 Wales Summit, NATO has made significant progress in reacting to and understanding the threat from Russia, but further work is required. Allies in the Baltic regions remain most alarmed by Russia, and assuring those who feel most threatened whilst also balancing NATO’s comprehensive posture remains a notable challenge. The Alliance has already taken important steps in this regard. Deployments and exercises in Eastern Europe have helped close what was perceived to be a gap in physical presence in the region. However, understanding of Russian strategy, and hence NATO’s most effective response, still remains under developed. This has also produced problems around enhanced forward deployment of conventional forces.
3. Concerns have grown that the assumptions built into the Strategic Concept and DDPR are becoming progressively less applicable to, or reflective of, the current context and environment. The Wales summit was assessed to be the wrong time to re-open the DDPR, and although challenges with Russia remained the dominant concerns to be addressed at Warsaw, re-opening of the DDPR was not part of the outcome there either.

“Within its strategic thinking, Russia has integrated its nuclear capabilities with its conventional and non-military strategic tools”

Russian leadership dynamics, regional strategy and capability integration

4. Obtaining a detailed understanding of Russia’s strategic calculus and doctrine is difficult, but some broad themes can be identified. In the eyes of Moscow, Russia has a right to sit at the world’s ‘top table’, a conviction that produces resentment as NATO has enlarged eastward to include states Russia has regarded as part of its sphere of influence. Economic pressure is unlikely to alter this perspective, and potentially may only encourage the Russian view that NATO and the West are pushing for regime change and Russian collapse. In order for NATO’s deterrence strategy to restrain rather than antagonise Russia, the posture and messaging will need to avoid conveying such messages of regime change and escalation to Moscow.
5. Russian military modernisation can be seen in this context; that is, as an attempt to bolster global power and create an assured capability to push power onto its periphery and counter US strength. Many believe Russia retains the military option to move against the Baltic states relatively quickly. The threat perceptions of those states consequently remain high in this regard, particularly as assessments suggest that Russian action is opportunistic and thus not necessarily predictable. However, as a

consensus-based Alliance, NATO's unified response constitutes a key part of its deterrent. If consensus is not achieved or maintained, the Alliance is limited in carrying out any threatened action, resulting in diminished deterrence. It is understood that Vladimir Putin has an interest in fracturing the Alliance for this reason, as by reducing the cohesion of the Alliance Moscow can give itself more room for manoeuvre. Although NATO appears able to demonstrate political strength at present, views diverge on how future Russian actions will impact this.

6. Within its strategic thinking, Russia has integrated its nuclear capabilities with its conventional and non-military strategic tools. Its lines between nuclear and non-nuclear capabilities are blurred, unlike those of NATO. Since 2009, Russia has harmonised its nuclear arsenal with other non-military strategic tools and the strategic tool kit has diversified. This characteristic is likely to remain as Russia progresses with modernisation and investment into nuclear weapons, and also new capabilities such as hypersonic glide vehicles.
7. This presents problems for an assessment of Russia's likely decisions in a crisis scenario, as dual-use systems blur the lines between conventional and nuclear responses. This blurring has also occurred as strategic and tactical nuclear weapons are merged into one arsenal, leaving the distinction between the two as purely conceptual. Further, Russian hybrid warfare depends on rapid escalation and quick response times, which creates an additional problem for NATO. The Alliance needs to improve its mobilisation times, as without this Moscow will be left with much room to manoeuvre, and deterrence could fail.
8. Understanding and addressing Russian thresholds for nuclear use is considerably complicated by the opacity of Russian doctrine. This opacity may not be deliberate obfuscation on Moscow's part, but rather a reflection of a lack of internal consensus in Russian thinking. Although there is some evidence that nuclear weapons are viewed as potential war-fighting instruments, disagreement exists about how high the bar is for such use. It is expected that Russia is thinking about all its available tools in a war scenario, which can be seen as reflective of the Russian tradition of worst-case scenario planning.
9. Nonetheless, Russian early use of nuclear weapons in a conflict remains difficult to envisage, and little evidence exists in the public domain to conclude that Russia's threshold for nuclear use is substantially lower than NATO's. Furthermore, decisions over use would be concentrated in the hands of a few key individuals in Moscow, whose personal thinking over thresholds for nuclear use may diverge from the limited contemporary indicators of coordinated plans. Public domain evidence cannot provide a clear understanding here. However, it has also been suggested that Russian doctrine might not identify actual thresholds for use, but instead utilise ambiguity over these thresholds for its deterrence effect. What is clear is that, whether or not Russia earnestly plans or contemplates nuclear use at particular stages of escalation, it presently wants NATO to believe the bar to nuclear use is low.
10. Finding a way to create "exit ramps" from the current situation, or ways to ease tensions and promote cooperation with Russia, permeate discussions on NATO and Russian conventional and nuclear strategies. How best to do so is not clear. Long-term dialogue to increase transparency and ease competition with Russia is of course ideal, but currently appears improbable. In general, the NATO-Russia relationship looks likely to remain broadly competitive and tense.
11. The future of arms control is a particular focus of debate within this context. The expiration of New START in six years, and the possibility of negotiating a follow-on agreement, might in normal times be an opportunity to re-engage Russia in an active discussion on arms control that is within its interests. For the time being, though, it appears unlikely that arms control can be an overarching framework within which to guide NATO-Russia relations. Instead, initiatives in this area should be pursued when they become possible, and should remain backed by concrete deterrence policy and

posture.

12. Despite the gloomy prospects for arms control, compartmentalised cooperation on issues such as Syria is still essential. Facilitating even this limited collaboration, however, is challenging. Russia often seeks to conflate issues that NATO would generally regard as unrelated, placing significant hurdles in the way of engagement. At the same time, there is some room for optimism. Examples of recent cooperation with Russia do exist, such as the Paris climate change agreement and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Iranian nuclear programme. Further consideration of whether there are ways that these forms of engagement can foster a more constructive and stabilising dialogue in the NATO-Russia context would be valuable. Any such dialogue, however, must be on the Alliance's terms, not Russia's.

“Concerns over Russia's significant nuclear capability and assertive nuclear policy in Europe raise questions about whether the NATO nuclear posture needs to mirror this in order to be effective”

NATO nuclear strategy and deterrence

13. Concerns over Russia's significant nuclear capability and assertive nuclear policy in Europe raise questions about whether the NATO nuclear posture needs to mirror this in order to be effective. However, NATO needs to ensure that it does not focus extensively on the question of Russia's thresholds at the expense of devising responses to a spectrum of military actions. NATO nuclear strategy should not be designed to mirror Russian brinkmanship, and must ensure that it is not developed against a poorly-understood threat, or a threat that does not in fact exist.
14. The Alliance must also take care not to posture itself in response to Russia only. Although this can serve a purpose in recognising vulnerabilities and gaps within NATO's posturing, the Alliance would also risk leaving open vulnerabilities to other threats beyond Russia. A narrow deterrence posture based on inflexible capabilities will not be most beneficial for NATO, and will limit its ability to address the concerns of all 28 nations. Deterrence postures need to ensure that the cost presented is high enough to change the risk-benefit calculations of all adversaries and for some this means that the nuclear element must be integrated with a conventional posture.
15. Options for tactical and strategic nuclear weapons thresholds need to be further explored within the Alliance, along with a plan for scenarios should these thresholds be crossed. Debate continues over whether such thresholds should be declared explicitly or left ambiguous. To bolster the hardware aspects of deterrence within the Alliance, nuclear sharing contributions need more consideration in the messaging of the Alliance. However, opportunities for doing so are extremely limited. Irrespective of this, both the US and UK should continue to emphasise their nuclear commitments to the Alliance. There is also potential for a greater utilisation of the French nuclear position. Greater uncertainty could be created in the minds of an adversary with respect to the nuclear response of NATO and the role the French forces would play in this. Despite Russia's efforts to modernize its nuclear forces and field new systems, changes in the character and composition of NATO's nuclear forces stationed in Europe do not appear to be necessary.
16. NATO can also pay more attention to the effect that its deterrence posture towards Russia has on public opinion within Alliance member states. Finding ways to more effectively 'sell' the concept of, and need for, nuclear deterrence is important, and the NATO posture needs to ensure that it is not creating unnecessary fear amongst publics. Furthermore, public opinion has the potential to limit the re-posturing of NATO's deterrence. The necessary modernization of dual-use aircraft has been challenged by NATO publics especially and any changes to force deployments, Alliance rhetoric or posturing is likely to be constrained and challenged by publics. NATO must therefore ensure that it is able to achieve the support of public opinion, as without this the credibility of the political unity could be weakened.

“NATO needs to be able to convince Russia that the costs it is willing to impose could be higher than Moscow might currently think, and consequently the response it risks in taking threatening or aggressive actions cannot be certain”

NATO's non-nuclear strategy and deterrence

17. The NATO response to Russia will, in the last analysis, need to undermine Moscow's confidence in its power and ability to act within the region. Whether that is best done via the use of hard or soft tools creates much more debate. Soft measures include financial investments in information sharing capabilities, or long term commitments to military innovations, to represent the on-going political resolve and assurances.
18. NATO needs to be able to convince Russia that the costs it is willing to impose could be higher than Moscow might currently think, and consequently the response it risks in taking threatening or aggressive actions cannot be certain. Such uncertainty can be gained from the closer integration of conventional and nuclear deterrence. An expected and proportional retaliatory threat might have strong deterrent capability, but only if it is possible for NATO to make clear assumptions about Russia's calculations. It might, on the other hand, remove a level of uncertainty, and in so doing give Moscow the room to make clearer cost-benefit calculations which may not be what NATO wants. Others advocate the utility of communicating a disproportionate response, to strengthen deterrence through increasing uncertainty. Conventionally Russia cannot hope to win a long conventional war against NATO forces, and this message must be conveyed to Russia. This highlights the need to maintain a flexible response, increasing uncertainty about what the NATO response would be for adversaries. A broadened deterrence posture can be demonstrated through not only the narrative of NATO, but also through practical measures such as military exercises.
19. Cyber capabilities will be very difficult to integrate into Alliance strategy or deterrence postures. Although cyber capabilities can play a helpful role in both offensive and defensive capacities, the practicality of this raises many issues. The secrecy tied to the use of cyber capabilities makes the task of coordinating messaging around such capabilities difficult. Cyber does have an important role to play in NATO strategy, but assigning thresholds of use to unknown capabilities is a major hurdle to the integration of cyber capabilities into the wider NATO deterrent. The role cyber capabilities could have will vary depending on at what point on the ladder of escalation they are used and whether they can play a role outside of like-for-like engagement. An additional difficulty is found when coordination across not only states but between sectors is also required. Key stakeholders in cyber tools include the private as well as public sector, which could prove problematic.
20. The desirability of NATO missile defence capability appears broadly shared, but debate continues regarding the role and cost of these systems. Cruise missile defence capabilities are also an area requiring particular consideration in future. In addition to their utility for defence, ballistic and cruise missile defence capabilities have deterrent value vis-à-vis Russia. Missile defence deployment milestones, including infrastructure in Romania, similarly send important signals to Russia about the strength of Alliance burden sharing and collective security.
21. In addressing the role of space capabilities, more questions arise than answers. Before a NATO space doctrine can be established and implemented, the Alliance needs to consider whether it is willing to hold anti-satellite (ASAT) capabilities at risk, and where such capabilities would fit on an escalatory ladder. However, deterring conventional aggression and promoting nuclear stability should take priority over the acquisition and integration of new tools.

Conclusion

Provocative behaviour and the difficulty of assessing Russia's strategy are posing a renewed challenge for NATO. Although the threat from Moscow is most acutely felt by those member states along the Eastern border, the Alliance must ensure it is able to create a unified response to the threat. Creating political divisions within the Alliance would undermine the credibility of NATO's deterrence posture and create space for increased

Russian belligerence without a threat of Alliance retaliation.

Alongside ensuring the maintenance of political cohesion, NATO needs to rethink its conventional and nuclear deterrence posturing. At present the Alliance is lacking an integrated strategy that encompasses both conventional and nuclear capabilities, and still faces the major challenge of formulating a united message that adequately overcomes Alliance differences relating to the integration, ambiguity and proportionality of its capabilities and deterrence postures. Furthermore, in future the Alliance will need to consider how new tools such as cyber capabilities and missile defence systems can be further integrated into Alliance deterrence and defence postures. Although these capabilities will likely prove difficult to implement and to gain consensus as a result of costs, information sharing and thresholds for use, NATO needs to ensure that it is able to address a growing spectrum of threats and communicate its commitment to ensuring the complete security of all member states. NATO also needs to ensure that its strategy is balanced and that it is not solely focusing on or mirroring the Russia posture, maintaining a comprehensive approach to security for all 28 members.

In the longer term, it is vital that the Alliance keeps the option for engagement with Russia on the table and maintains routes to ease tensions at all times. Although at present there is limited opportunity for this, NATO must ensure it does not shut off prospects of de-escalation and dialogue.

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